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AUTHOR Church, Joseph
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ABSTRACT

Read on the occasion of the establishment of the Joseph Church collection in psychology and education at the New York Public Library, this anecdotal and allusive paper informally discusses cultural changes affecting Americans' views and practices in the areas of parenting and child development. Reference is made to the present political context. Radical changes occurring since 1943, such as the reconceptualization of parent roles, are seen as surface changes reflecting a more radical shift in the framework of cultural assumptions within which Americans live and act. Psychology is thought to have provided only two important contributions in the area of child rearing: the concepts of deprivation and modeling. Parents are seen as exerting a far stronger effect on their children's development than any amount or kind of schooling, and the belief is expressed that parents are coming to understand that children thrive on demands that cultivate children's sense of competence and responsibility. Claims are made that psychological theories, including those of Freud and Piaget, can obscure the true nature of childhood and that little is known of what children are like as people. In conclusion, allusions are made to present day Social Darwinists and their anti-cultural, regressive attitudes toward children and the potential that can be realized through the creation of a life-enhancing culture. (RH)

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THE CULTURAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT:
REALITY AND FANTASY

by

Joseph Church

Professor Emeritus of Psychology

Brooklyn College of the City University of New York

Paper read March 31, 1983, at the Early Childhood Resource and Information
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by JOSEPH CHURCH

In 1943, Arnold Gesell and Frances Ilg published a book called Infant and Child in the Culture of Today. This book is still on sale and continues, I believe, to be widely read. What Gesell and his colleagues had to offer was developmental norms, the average ages at which children could be expected to reach out to things, roll over, sit up, stand, walk, be ready for toilet training.

But the title of the book suggested something deeper. It seemed to be saying that you can understand child development only in terms of its cultural context. There was the further implication that culture can change with the times. In fact, the Gesell group's writings contained much good sense but very little culture. Gesell seems to have been committed to the view that early development--infancy, toddlerhood, perhaps the early preschool years--is autogenous--that is, self-generated, spontaneous, and dependent hardly at all on environmental support. Since Gesell's day we have learned to take the concept of culture more seriously. We now recognize that deeply held, even unconscious, cultural assumptions are an integral part of adult personality, and they become an integral part of the human nature that children acquire living in a social context. Large numbers of people discover the potency of culture when they reach adolescence. This is when people learn, with more than a little help from their friends, that their parents, and the adult world in general, have conned them into accepting a set of beliefs very much at odds with up-to-the-minute styles of thinking. Thus is born adolescent rebellion and the often painful attempt to fashion a personal code of values--painful precisely

because it is so hard to extirpate a cultural outlook bred into you from the cradle.

One reason that young parents continue to consult Infant and Child in the Culture of Today may be that it makes them feel good about their own child's development, and hence about themselves as parents. The American culture of 1983--going on 1984--bears little resemblance to the American culture of 1943. And the pace of child development today makes obsolete the developmental norms set by babies of the 1930s. Except for teething, today's babies do just about everything at younger ages than the babies studied by Gesell and company. There are several factors at work: improved sanitation, improved medical care including immunization--just for example, in 1950, there were over 33,000 reported new cases of polio in the United States; in 1978, there were 15--improved diet, whatever goes to make babies healthier and stronger than they used to be. Of equal importance to children's psychological development, there has been a radical change since 1943 in parental attitudes, in styles of parenting, in understanding how children behave and develop. And this in turn is part of a still larger cultural change, a revolutionary revision in our thinking about just about everything under the sun.

What I want to talk about is some of the major cultural changes that affect our views and practices in the sphere of child development. I also want to talk about some of the ways culture and cultural change find expression in--and sometimes collide with--political structures and policies. If I have time, I will also venture some guesses about changes still to come. But what I most want to emphasize is that cultural and political change is often stressful. Cultural change goes on asynchronously, like

bodily growth. While an emancipated vanguard marches bravely into a dream of the future, conservative and reactionary forces are battling to stem the tides of change and lead us back to the good old days of sharply defined duties and eternal verities. The "fantasy" in my title refers to the nostalgic belief that we can turn back the cultural and political clock. The "reality," by contrast, is the recognition that we have to modify our ideas and attitudes to take account of new knowledge about the way things are.

Let me digress a moment to emphasize what I am not saying. I am not proposing that we should merely shed archaic cultural views, habits, and customs. This would be to commit the Romantic-Naturalist fallacy that a pure human nature lies imprisoned within the constraining garments of culture. Culture is essential to human functioning. I simply assert this as fact, but I am willing to argue it at length. The task is twofold: To dissolve the obsolete features of the old culture and to invent new, more reality-oriented cultural forms to take their place. I was rather surprised, looking through a book of quotations, to find that Abraham Lincoln had anticipated these sentiments. He said: "The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves." I do not really think that Lincoln believed there had ever been such a thing as a quiet past. History records one tempestuous era after another. But Lincoln was right in seeing that every age faces unprecedented problems and must contrive unprecedented solutions.

The revolution in attitudes toward child rearing is usually dated from the publication of Benjamin Spock's book shortly after World War II. I do not know just how much blame or credit Spock deserves, but there seems little doubt that his injunction to "Enjoy your baby" became something of a rallying cry for the postwar generation of parents. Allow me to remind you that these were the parents of the baby boom, and that baby-boom babies have now reached child-bearing age and are producting a boomlet of their own.

Spock was a landmark figure, but his coming was anticipated by an unholy alliance of psychoanalysts and cultural anthropologists who wanted to liberate parents and children from the suffocating restraints of traditional Anglo-American culture. Let me remind you of the Natural-Childbirth movement, the Breastfeeding movement, the Progressive-Education and Nursery-school movements, all of which took root in the 1930s and 1940s but reached full flower only after World War II. I mention only in passing that Sigmund Freud would have been scandalized by the doctrines that were preached in his name. Freud was no advocate of permissive, stress-free rearing of children without inhibitions, and to him sexual permissiveness spelled the end of civilization.

Note that Psychology proper played a very limited role in the revolution in attitudes toward child rearing. There seem to be only two important factual contributions to the changing climate. The first of these is the concept of deprivation, first put forward by René Spitz, a psychiatrist, and later verified by by such psychologists as Harold Skeels, Harry Harlow, and Wayne Dennis. The second is the concept of modeling, which is only another way of saying the same thing that parents have always been told: Set your children a good example and, equally important, avoid setting them a bad example.

The difference is that students of modeling showed that the ancient advice was to be taken very seriously indeed: Children copy their identification figures, starting with their parents, and no amount of preaching can undo the lessons learned by observing the people who count in your life.

Need I remind you of some of the absurdities that were taught and practiced a few years back? One was that parents should never say No to their child. Another was that well-brought-up children can be counted on to toilet train themselves, free of ill-guided parental intrusions. Some parents took quite literally Clara Davis's findings--which are really rather hard to pin down--that young children could be relied on to choose a balanced diet for themselves. For credulous parents, this meant preparing thrice-a-day smorgasbords from which the young gourmet could select those items that spoke to his or her tissue needs.

Things have settled down since those days, and parents have learned how to be relaxed without abdicating parental obligations and authority. Parents have learned to view and treat their children as real human beings, beings who deserve respect but who are nonetheless still children. It may be wishful thinking, but I believe that parents are coming to understand that children thrive on demands that cultivate children's sense of competence and responsibility. If only because of structural changes in society and the economy, children are nowadays being asked to take on an increasing share in the work of the family.

In talking about the radical cultural changes that have come to pass since 1943, we can begin with the obvious. Marriage and parenthood used to be taken for granted as desirable and even as necessary to mature

adulthood. Now they are matters for serious thought and conscious decision. Growing numbers of young adults are forgoing marriage altogether. Either they live with a semipermanent companion or they sleep around--there may be young adults who practice chastity, but I have not yet met any. Those who do opt for marriage enter that state at ever-later ages. Fewer couples than in years past choose to have children. When they do, they postpone child bearing to the last reasonable point in the woman's fertile years. And when the children come, both parents take it for granted that responsibility for child care--the nasty parts as well as the enjoyable ones--devolves equally upon father and mother. This is one of the quickest and most profound cultural changes on record. In no more than thirty years, fathers have moved from being semidetached monitors (and critics) of the child-rearing process to fully committed participants from pregnancy on. Fathers now share to the limits of their ability in labor and birth. Fathers as well as mothers know firsthand the immersion in mucus, urine, feces, and vomit that is an intimate and intrinsic part of early parenthood. Further, it is now accepted that the traditional division of roles no longer applies. Both father and mother are both breadwinners and homemakers. If both parents work outside the home, the baby joins the growing legions who spend a sizable part of their time in day care. Day care in turn brings babies into a kind of contact with other babies that used to be quite rare in North American society. What I think we are seeing in consequence is a decided acceleration in the development of social awareness and social skills in young children.

Family breakup is nothing new, but our climbing divorce rate reflects a changed view of marriage. It is no longer a sacramental state, a covenant with God, which must be preserved even at the cost of great personal sacrifice.

To today's pragmatic parents, a marriage whose costs outweigh its benefits does not deserve to survive. Acceptance of divorce as the logical answer to marital strain produces large numbers of one-parent families.

But there is yet another source of single parenthood. Some unknown but apparently growing number of people choose to become parents--through adoption or other means--without the bother of a partner. Yet another change is that the parent in many single-parent households is a man. In the good old days, it was a cultural given that women were the "natural" rearers of young children, and single fathers were expected to have a woman servant to look after the kids, or else to farm them out to relatives. Few people nowadays believe in the reality of a maternal instinct, but if there is such a thing it is found as often in men as in women.

These are dramatic changes that have taken place over a forty-year period, one that coincides approximately with my adult life. Dramatic as they are, these are only surface changes reflecting an even more radical shift in the framework of cultural assumptions within which we live and act. Consider our conception of morality. A central topic in discussions of good and evil used to be sexual behavior. But now, with an exception that I'll get to in a moment, sexuality seems to have moved almost completely out of the moral sphere and into the realms of the sensual, the aesthetic, and the pragmatic. The Supreme Court's 1973 decision on abortion was only a long-delayed recognition that sex is something to be enjoyed, uncluttered by threats of involuntary parenthood. There is the further pragmatic consideration that one must avoid venereal infections, and the aesthetic consideration that you do not want to be intimate with just anybody, but

you would have a hard time nowadays making a case that enjoying the body's capacities for ecstasy is in some way wicked or depraved.

The focus of morality has now shifted to the domain of manipulation, exploitation, deception for selfish advantage, intimidation, coercion, and violence. Thus exploitative or coercive sex continues to be evil, but not because it is sexual. It is evil in the context that the world is full of predatory people who will not hesitate to do in those unfortunates who fall into their clutches. And I am not talking only about the con artists, the muggers, the rapists, and the other assorted sociopaths with whom we are liable to have direct contact. I am speaking also of the more remote, often anonymous, corporate and government officials who preside over the depletion and pollution of the environment while mouthing pieties about the blessings of technology, growth, progress, prosperity, and maybe even virginity. Still more monstrous are those in high places who try to flimflam us and our children into joining a thermo-nuclear suicide pact with the Soviet Union.

We have within our reach a vision of human decency. We know how to rear children who are bright, loving, imaginative, cooperative, and competent. But still there is something missing. I do not think we have yet learned to take children seriously. That is, we have not truly come to terms with them as people.

Let me try to make clear what I mean. To be truly clear, I would have to know precisely what it is that I am trying to say, and I don't. I have a sense of something lacking and I am groping for words to give shape to my feelings. We sincerely love our children and wish them well. But when we are in a loving mood we tend to sentimentalize and idealize

children. When we are not so lovingly inclined--which may be more of the time than we like to admit--we subhumanize them. We manage always to be somewhat off target. Take the slogan "Children are our most valuable resource." Since when are children a resource? They are people like us, not only our children but also our brothers and sisters and comrades, trying like us to find an identity and a role in a world they never made.

Psychological theories can blind us to the true nature of childhood. Freud, for instance, gave us an image of babies and preschool children as sex fiends grimly determined to have carnal knowledge of the opposite-sex parent and to destroy the same-sex one. Which is not necessarily false, but it is far from the whole picture. The well-socialized middle-years child, by contrast, is seen as the serene sublimator of now-defused sexual and murderous passions. Perhaps if Freud had spent less time wandering through the mists of his patients' infantile amnesia, he would have had more time to get to know some children. I waste no breath on the behaviorist image of the child, which seems to have no personhood whatever.

The Piagetian view is little better. Piaget gave us a child whose mental structures manufacture bizarre theories about how things work, from pendulums to stealing cookies to having babies. Since Piaget and his disciples never gave much weight to learning, they ended up confusing ignorance with unreason. Like the makers of intelligence tests. Piaget and company have given very little thought to distinguishing between those sorts of things children are likely to notice and learn about on their own and the kinds of things that they need to have called to their attention or explained. Almost anybody can figure out how a tricycle works--notions like force and friction are part of our intuitive cognitive equipment--but

the processes of digestion are less obvious. Our bodies do not have to be told how to process the stuff we eat, but we as observers of ourselves have to have our bodies' inner workings explained to us. But we do not know what it is that children, left to themselves, choose to think about, how they think, what if anything they find puzzling, and how they feel. Psychologists like Piaget have found penetrating questions to ask children, but they may have been the wrong questions. Recent research shows that children are much smarter than Piaget thought they were. They are quite sensible about some areas of cause and effect, their material world is not nearly so unstable as Piaget thought, and in matters of human relations children are only a little more childish than adults. Some recent research on children's understanding of how people remember showed that, by the late middle years, children have figured out for themselves just about everything that experimental psychology spent one hundred years learning. These recent insights are welcome, but they still do not tell us what children are like as people. And they tell us even less about what kinds of people children could be if they were given different sorts of upbringings. Journalists often do a better job than psychologists in getting kids' views of things.

I think the most telling argument is that if we really understood children, we would know how to provide them with a good education. I do not view American education--or European, for that matter--as a total failure, but neither am I going to wax enthusiastic about the intellectual, emotional, and moral wonders it works with the nation's children. I think the weight of the research evidence is that parents have a far stronger effect on their children's development than any amount or kind of schooling. Luckily,

there is an asymmetry here. A bad school is almost powerless to damage a well-reared child, but a devoted teacher or succession of teachers is sometimes able to salvage a child from an unfavorable background. In general, we hail as successful that education--at home, in the schools, and in the streets--that turns out replicas of our idealized selves. We might call it the Clone Theory of education.

My main point is that we do not really know our children and, not knowing them, are unable to take them as seriously as they deserve. Of course, I cannot be sure that it would be to children's benefit to have us understand them better. In fact, I do not even know if children have all that much of an inner life; maybe they are all on the surface. But I wish, if only for my own idiosyncratic reasons, that I had a better grasp of the nature of childhood.

Even without a thoroughgoing understanding, though, we still know how to do an effective job of parenting. This brings us up against a warning uttered by the reputed father of Social Darwinism, Herbert Spencer: "Do not try to produce an ideal child; it would find no fitness in this world." Spencer correctly foresaw that we would fail to provide our children with a cultural, economic, and political framework in which they could be free to be decent people. As a Social Darwinist, Spencer believed that it was beyond human ingenuity to fashion a new and better social order. Social Darwinism tells us that it is misdirected charity to try to succor the unfit at the expense of those endowed by nature with superior powers. One has the feeling that those who govern us have been reading Spencer. The crackpot realism of Social Darwinism dictates that our main priority must be to build doomsday machines to hold off the enemies at the gate.

If this means the sacrifice of social welfare programs that give people hope of a measure of dignity, and in some cases hope of staying alive, so be it. The law of the jungle decrees that there must be losers as well as survivors.

It is obvious that the Social Darwinists have never accepted the potency of cultural forces in shaping human nature, or the idea that cultures can be created. The Social Darwinists are themselves the entrenched embodiment of an obsolete culture dedicated to the proposition that ruthless, dog-eat-dog competition is the only game in town, that the joys and sorrows of love in all its guises, that sensuality, play, art, learning, and the exercise of reason are insignificant fluff that must not be allowed to distract us from the virile ideal of bashing your neighbors before they get a chance to bash you.

It is inescapably true that we live in a world we never made, a cockeyed world with ambiguous, ever-changing rules. But that is no excuse for not trying to remake it. I'm willing to bet there are some smart people around who could figure out how to go about it.